

Bushwick Bill, Rapper Who Told Harrowing Tales in Geto Boys, Is Dead at 52

By Jon Caramanica

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Bushwick Bill, who helped inject vivid psychological horror and lightly morbid comedy into Southern hip-hop storytelling in becoming one of the genre’s most recognizable characters, died on Sunday at a Colorado hospital. He was 52.

His death was confirmed by his sister Ann-Marie White. No other details were provided. Last month, Bushwick Bill announced that he had Stage 4 pancreatic cancer.

Bushwick Bill — who was born with dwarfism and stood approximately 3 feet 8 inches tall — was a member of Geto Boys, the Houston trio whose work in the late 1980s and early- to mid-1990s on the Rap-A-Lot label was among the most formative in Southern rap. The group was known for its incendiary, sometimes grotesque lyrics, and also for songs that grappled with morality in stark terms.

That made Geto Boys a flash point for cultural conservatives upset about rap lyrics. Bushwick Bill alluded to their criticism on “Talkin’ Loud Ain’t Saying Nothin’,” from the 1989 album “Grip It! On That Other Level”: “You don’t want your kids to hear songs of this nature/ But you take ‘em to the movies to watch Schwarzenegger.”

The influential producer Rick Rubin signed Geto Boys to his Def American imprint and rerecorded that album as “The Geto Boys.” Rubin was forced to find a new distributor after his original one declined to release the album over its graphic content.

Geto Boys returned to Rap-A-Lot and continued to release strong work, including the outstanding 1991 album “We Can’t Be Stopped,” which featured the group’s biggest single, “Mind Playing Tricks on Me.”

The song is alarmingly spooky, and Bushwick Bill’s verse, which comes last, described a disturbing hallucination in which he was being attacked while trick-or-treating:

“The more I swung, the more blood flew/ Then he disappeared and my boys disappeared too/ Then I felt just like a fiend/ It wasn’t even close to Halloween.”

Bushwick Bill was born Richard Stephen Shaw in Kingston, Jamaica, on Dec. 8, 1966. He spent much of his childhood in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. His mother worked as a hotel housekeeper, and his father was in the merchant marine. As a teenager he immersed himself in New York’s emerging hip-hop culture, writing graffiti and competing in break dancing competitions.

He moved to Houston in the 1980s and joined an early incarnation of Geto Boys as a dancer (under the name Little Billy). But he soon became a rapper, appearing on the group's 1988 debut album, "Making Trouble." After that LP, the group rejiggered its membership, landing on its essential lineup: Bushwick Bill, Scarface and Willie D.

Bushwick Bill had an early brush with death in 1991. High on PCP and grain alcohol, he said, he got into an altercation with his girlfriend and was shot in the right eye, a trauma he described in harrowing detail on "Ever so Clear," from his 1992 solo debut album "Little Big Man."

He said in interviews that he had been pronounced dead, toe-tagged and taken to the morgue. "I was actually on the cold slab," he said in 2014. (He told differing stories about the shooting; in some accounts his mother had shot him.)

The incident was immortalized on the album cover of "We Can't Be Stopped," which features a photo of Bushwick Bill taken in the hospital. Flanked by Willie D and Scarface, he is shown on a stretcher, his eye blood-red, the day before he had surgery to remove it. He later said that he had been so medicated, he didn't know the photo was being taken, and that he didn't see the album cover until after its release.

In addition to several albums with Geto Boys, Bushwick Bill released many solo records and appeared on Dr. Dre's landmark 1992 album "The Chronic." In the 1990s, he announced that he was renaming himself Dr. Wolfgang von Bushwick in the Barbarian Mother-Funk Stay High Dollar Billstir.

A devoted Christian in his younger days, he became born again in 2006. In the mid 2010s, he was filmed on and off for three years for documentary film about his life. It has not been released.

Complete information about survivors was not immediately available.

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